

PRODUCT LABELS ARE MORE THAN JUST STICKERS

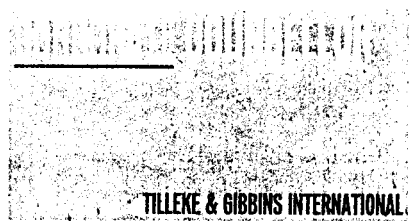
Recent scandals, particularly the one involving melamine-tainted milk from China, have affected consumer awareness in a big way, making consumers pay more attention to the quality and safety of the products they purchase. This is particularly true for products that are ingested, such as food and beverages.

In Thailand, these products must first receive approval from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the case of food and drugs, and the Excise Department in the case of alcoholic beverages, before being launched in the market. The labels of these goods must contain certain information intended to protect consumers. By being aware of this labelling information, consumers will be in a position to differentiate between real products that have gone through authorised channels and fakes that may be harmful to their health.

Product name: Whether it is for a box of chocolate, a package of aspirin, or a bottle of wine, product packaging always carries a name distinguishing it from other products. Many companies make the effort of registering the name as a trademark, in which case the symbol can be included next to the name as in PEPSI or LAYS. Unfortunately, some counterfeiters will use similar product names for the same type of products in an attempt to mislead consumers, such as the name VIOGRO for erectile dysfunction drugs. Often, these counterfeit products will not have gone through the same type of rigorous testing as their genuine counterparts.

Contact details: The origin of the products must also be clearly stated on the packaging for food, drugs, and alcoholic beverages. Food products are required to bear the names and addresses of producers or re-packers of foods manufactured within the country, and the names and addresses of importers as well as the country of production. A similar requirement applies to drugs, which have to include the names of the manufacturers and the province of production. Alcoholic beverages face even more stringent requirements, as the names of the manufacturers, importers, and distributors all have to be provided on the label. Information regarding the source of the product provides reassurance to customers and can be used as confirmation that the product has been imported through authorised channels.

Registration number and excise stamp: A reference number provided by the responsible agency has to be included on every product label. Drug labels must contain a serial number, while alcoholic beverage labels have a registration number in certain cases. For food labels, the FDA will assign a 13-digit serial number framed in a specially shaped box, the absence of which should raise a red flag among



consumers because it could mean that FDA approval has not been granted. The inclusion of this information is mandatory, but it can be difficult for consumers to confirm whether the number is correct.

Alcoholic beverages must bear an excise stamp in the form of a piece of paper affixed over the cap of the bottle, which is provided after the company has complied with the required tax requirements. If this stamp is not affixed to alcohol sold in stores, it means that the product has not gone through the required channels.

Quantity or ingredients of products: Labels of many food products must show the main ingredients, including artificial substances, and the quantity of each. The percentage of each ingredient must also be indicated for certain products, such as chocolate. Labels of alcoholic beverages must indicate alcohol concentration as a percentage of the volume. Genuine products will include these elements, allowing consumers to make important judgments regarding compliance with health requirements.

Recommendations or warnings: It is mandatory that product labels contain recommendations or warnings under certain circumstances. For food, a statement is required when artificial flavours are included in order to avoid misleading consumers. Alcoholic beverages must include a warning in Thai stating that sale to persons under 18 years of age is prohibited, that drinking impairs driving ability, and that alcoholic beverages are not suitable for persons under 18 years of age. To reiterate, a product that does not contain the legally mandated warning may not have passed the required government inspection.

Summary: Under the current economic and financial difficulties, consumers can be expected to seek out good deals. However, they must be mindful that products that at first appear to be a bargain may actually be costly in terms of personal health. The five elements discussed above, which are easily discernible on product labels, play an important role in helping consumers determine whether the food, drugs, or alcoholic beverages they are purchasing have passed the standards of the governmental agencies concerned.

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